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# GROUND COVER

NEWS AND SOLUTIONS FROM THE GROUND UP | WASHTENAW COUNTY, MICH.

## Special Edition 2020: U-M students respond to stories of homelessness



U-M freshmen English 124 students meet online over Zoom for their class about community-engaged writing. Students worked together on Ground-cover anthology articles, covering a variety of topics, throughout their Fall 2020 semester.



# Welcome to this special edition

## GROUNDCOVER STAFF

Each year, in addition to the regular monthly issues, Groundcover News publishes one or two special editions, or anthologies, bringing together outstanding materials from our archives that center around a particular theme. This special edition not only showcases works about our vendors and poverty-related issues published over the past 10 years, but also new works that sit in conversation to these archived pieces written by U-M freshmen undergraduates during their Fall 2020 semester.

On page six in “Intersecting paths: strangers journey to identity,” our U-M student contributors explore their identities — and the intersections of these identities with each other — inspired by personal narratives written by GCN vendors throughout the years. On page 10, in “GEO: fighting for us all,” other student writers look at the relationship between their university and our shared community through the lens of collective bargaining.

In this issue we are not only celebrating the resilience of our community over past year, but the past *decade* of resilience, social change, new beginnings and old friendships in the Groundcover News community — a community you are now a part of. Throughout it all, you’ll see on page eight that even in a pandemic we always find time to have fun together.

We hope you enjoy this special edition as much as we enjoyed making it!

# Groundcover partnership with the University of Michigan

**CARLINA DUAN**  
U-M English 124 Instructor

Given the state of the world these days, I often find myself buzzing with anxiety before my mornings even begin — tugging on the fraying hem of my shirt while logging onto (yet another) video conference, the screen revealing my face in a smatter of bluish, glowing pixels.

My buoy for the past few months has been the Community-Engaged Writing class I teach at the University of Michigan — an online class offered through the English Department for freshmen during the Fall 2020 semester. From late August to December, I’m working alongside 18 first-year U-M students in partnership with Groundcover News. Our course challenges students to explore writing within a “community” context — writing as it lives and creates beyond the steep and often-sheltered walls of academia.

Students in this course study and produce writing in support of Groundcover — in the form of social media posts, personal narratives and other immersive research-based writing. Along the way, they learn and unlearn how their own social and personal identities shape their educational journeys. They learn how writing can be a form of social action.

They learn to pay close attention to the broader world of Ann Arbor beyond the borders of campus. And they consider a lens of cultural humility within their work as scholars and as inhabitants of their local and global communities.

For the 2020 Groundcover Anthology, students worked together in groups to close-read previous issues of Groundcover. For two months in the early fall, students who had never met one another face-to-face collaborated digitally to expand and re-contextualize previous stories from the Groundcover archives. They then wrote these anthology pieces that are rooted in — and celebrate — the ongoing work of Groundcover News, and the ongoing work and people that make up our Ann Arbor community. From personal narratives that explore writers’ identities as women of color entering their new Michigan communities, to an exploratory piece on the community-wide impacts of organizing efforts from the Graduate Employers’ Organization, to pieces considering the #MeToo movement in 2020, there is much in this issue to chew on.

This collaboration between Groundcover and *U-M English 126: Community-Engaged Writing* seeks to honor and center the previous decade of rich stories that Groundcover has illuminated for our town.

# Mental health, homelessness and our community

**GRACE DESJARDINS,  
REBECCA MAO AND LYDIA  
MILLER**  
U-M student contributors

Mental illness and homelessness are serious, prevalent issues faced in the

United States today, yet so much stigma surrounds these topics. Mental health breakdowns and homelessness are strongly correlated.

Equitable access to mental health resources — especially for homeless youth — is an problem in our country,

and even our community. We feel that no matter where one’s mental health issues are rooted, we all deserve the right to equitable access to mental health services and resources. Ozone House in Ypsilanti helps combat the barrier of mental health resource

dearth within the youth homeless population.

Ozone House is a nonprofit that assists homeless youth in finding safe places to live, while also providing

see **COMMUNITY** page 15 ➡

## GROUNDCOVER

### Mission

Creating opportunity and a voice for low-income people while taking action to end homelessness and poverty.

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# Life being homeless as a small female



**TABITHA L.**  
Groundcover vendor No. 360

Hello everybody, my name is Tabitha L. and I'm going to tell you just a little bit about what it's like being a homeless woman. First off it is very scary because anything can happen to you at night. That is when a lot of people are around and drunk and they will try to have their way with you at any cost. My sister Crystal was just murdered out on the streets this summer, so like I said anything can happen to you. My sister was also raped by a man that she had trusted while she was asleep outside one night a few years back.

I lived under a bridge in Ypsilanti, like a lot of people already know who read my story back in the April issue of Groundcover. A lot of scary things happened to me at that time in my life. There was one time that I had to run for my life because a guy

that I had prostituted with wanted his money back. Thank god that night I ran into a couple that was walking their dog and they saved me. There was another time that someone pulled a gun out on me.

But let me tell you about this time that just actually happened to me. A guy was riding his bike with a mask on and right away I had a weird feeling about him, but I kept on working and he ended up coming back to go in the store I was selling around, so I decided to pitch him. Then it just got more and more scary by the minute. He started asking me if I knew where to get him some drugs, but then when I said no, he was trying to get me to prostitute with him. I trusted the guy that was working in the store so I asked him to keep an eye out on me until I could get ahold of [my friend] Joe. So when we were all standing outside smoking he kept insisting that he was going to walk with me, so thank god once again it didn't end bad. Joe came and got me and that was that.

The point is that anything can happen and it is very scary out here in this world — definitely when you're homeless.

*Originally published in Groundcover News Fall, 2018*

# Anonymous homeless

Hello. My name isn't important. I am homeless.

I am homeless because I am an addict, because I am an alcoholic, because my wife died and I went into a deep depression. I am homeless because I was laid off, because I am physically and mentally handicapped. I am homeless because of a course of unfortunate events that left me blurry, afraid and confused. I am homeless through no fault of my own. I worked hard, tried my best — but somehow still found myself on the streets.

The reason I am homeless isn't as important as the fact that I am homeless. That is the present, that is the here and now, that is the reality of it. I sleep on sidewalks, in doorways, in alleys and in the woods. I eat leftovers that people give me as they walk by or someone might buy me a sandwich. Handouts at the shelter or a church and sometimes trash can keep me fed.

I wasn't always homeless. I used to work in a factory, a hospital, a restaurant or even an art gallery. I used to be a chef, a nurse, a teacher or the manager of some store. I was someone's father,

mother, sister, brother, husband, wife, friend, companion.

Now, though, I am homeless. I haven't had a real job in a while, except for the work I pick up every now and then sweeping a sidewalk or cleaning windows. I can make a buck or two by singing a song for you as you walk by on your way to work or the store; maybe offering you the local street paper as you pass, or just begging some spare change.

I never thought this would be me, that this would become my life. But it has, and that's that. I am homeless in Ann Arbor.

**Editor's note:** *The author was one of the campers who had their tents and belongings bulldozed at Broadway Park by Amtrak workers at the behest of the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT). They had nowhere else to go; Mercy House was willing to let them camp on their property, but the city told them they could only camp there for a night. As one of the campers put it, "I'm going to live for more than one night."*

*Originally published in Groundcover News November, 2019*

# Not helpless, just homeless



**LASHAWN COURTWRIGHT**  
Groundcover vendor No. 56

Men, women, and children nowadays find themselves deeply infused in this thing we call homelessness.

When people see us about, doing what we can to somehow make it through the day... not understanding the circumstances people meet our eyes, their faces full of disdain!

We're not helpless or hopeless, just under a bit of a strain, of the constantly changing economy in which for now we remain.

We can change this picture if we all pitch in to bring it to a halt... This thing called homelessness! That is to stop any further despair. With this in mind, we're only merely there!

Homelessness is not a disease; you don't catch it like a common cold from a sneeze.

It can come at a time when life is good, then turn around like a derailed train that at the start [is] traveling smoothly about the tracks. Situations hit us and knock us down like a boxer in a bout, knocked down in the first round flat on his back!

*Previously published in Groundcover News Fall, s2018*

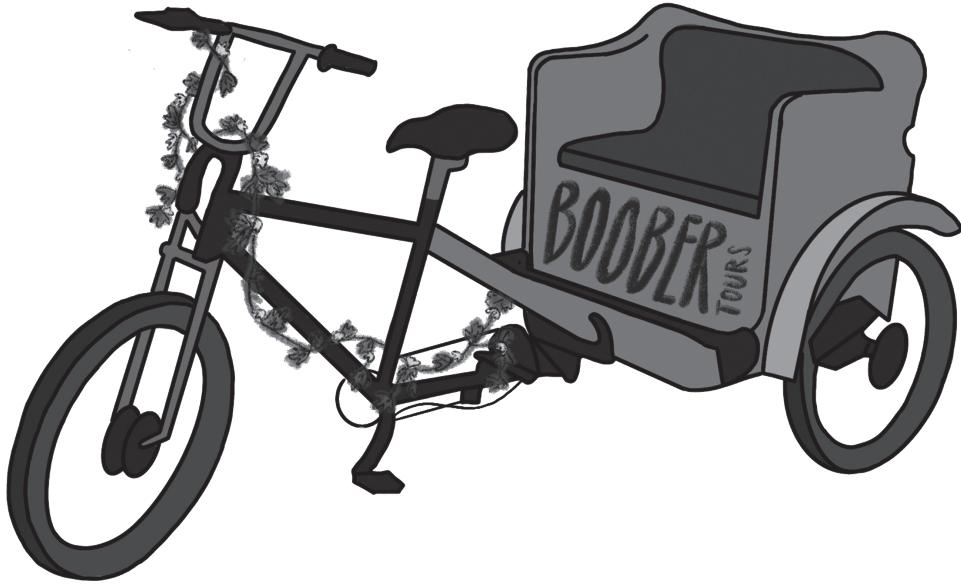
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## Addressing social issues... with a unique twist

**DIANA GOLDANSKY,  
JEANELLE MAPILI AND  
MARK SABA**  
U-M student contributors

In a vibrant community like Ann Arbor, entrepreneurship, innovation and exploration are encouraged and praised. Ann Arbor is home to quite a few different organizations that address societal issues with creativity and a strong desire to support their community members. Boober Tours, a pedicab company, gives back by providing jobs for rehabilitated individuals. Hope Clinic provides a variety of health resources for low-income families. Staying Power uses art to shed light on the housing crisis and gentrification. These inspiring organizations make our communities and the world a better, more equitable and safer place.

### **Boober Tours: transportation to a better and greener future**

Boober Tours of Ann Arbor is a pedicab company that comes with an extraordinary backstory. It may be hard to believe, but Boober was founded by a homeless individual named Kevin Spangler, who battled through drug addiction and a prison sentence.

As a convicted felon, it was difficult for Spangler to find a lucrative job because employers wouldn't overlook his criminal record. Society slammed the door shut on Spangler and others like him, so he was forced to seek out alternative ways to support himself and his family. That's when, in 2016, he got the idea to start a "pedal-powered on-demand transportation service" and bought his first pedicab.

One of the most inspiring aspects of Spangler's company is that his ultimate goal is to provide jobs for people who used to struggle with addiction and have just left rehabilitation

centers. Spangler understands what it is like to be rejected by society and wants to allow recovering addicts to turn their lives around.

Furthermore, pedicabs are a more environmentally-friendly mode of transportation than cars. A pedicab consists of a two-wheeled carriage that is attached to a bicycle. Pedicabs may utilize electric assistance but they don't emit carbon dioxide and consume barely any energy. By providing this service, Boober Tours is also making Ann Arbor a greener community.

After learning about Boober's positive impact on the environment, I began to wonder about how my hometown, New York City, can work to decrease air pollution. For the past 20 years, the Metronome — located in Union Square in Manhattan — has been one of the most fascinating public art projects. Since September 27, 2020, the Metronome — which includes a 62-foot wide electronic clock — has displayed to the second the critical time window that the world has to save the earth from the irreversible effects of climate change.

Although New York City has numerous modes of transportation such as pedicabs that do not require the use of fuel, these services are overpriced and therefore disincentivize New Yorkers from utilizing them. These human-powered vehicles are merely a tourist attraction.

Nevertheless, there are ways to make pedicabs more appealing to New Yorkers. For instance, pedicab use generally costs about \$1.75-\$3 per minute. Boober Tours in Ann Arbor offers rides for free and it is the passenger's decision whether or not to leave a tip for the driver. Boober subsidizes the ride cost by doubling as a mobile advertising company, attaching billboards to each cab. Reducing

the prices of New York City pedicabs could encourage more people to use this service on a more casual basis. Additionally, nothing is more frustrating for a New Yorker trying to get to work on time than the heavy traffic. If pedicab companies strategized and came up with quicker routes to avoid traffic jams it would relieve some stress for commuters. Finally, according to the Bowery Mission statistics, there are thousands of individuals in New York City that are recovering from a substance abuse disorder, and one in 125 New Yorkers are homeless. Pedicab companies could employ these individuals and give them a second chance at stability just like Kevin Spangler did.

According to Metronome's digital clock, we have about seven years to save the world from the devastating and long-term effects of climate change. Imagine how increasing fuel-less transportation can drastically change the fate of our planet and the lives of future generations. Imagine the improvement in the quality of life in our cities, and the hope it would inspire.

### **The limitless boundaries of health care for all**

Now more than ever, access to quality health care, food and other resources is critical in staying safe and healthy. For many, it is difficult to safely obtain or afford these basic necessities. Hope Clinic's mission is to form a community where every person has the opportunity to serve or be served. As a nonprofit organization, Hope is dedicated to helping and healing members of the community and provide free care for everyone in need. In our own communities, it is important to reach out and show the same level of care to those who need it, no matter their background, lifestyle or situation.

One of Hope Clinic's main goals is to collect and distribute a wide variety of resources through donations and the help of volunteers. This includes quality healthcare for everyone. At both their Ypsilanti and Wayne clinics, they are able to offer primary care for individuals who are uninsured or underinsured at no cost through onsite appointments or telemedicine. They also provide health care services using communication technologies, and help individuals schedule onsite appointments. Along with meeting basic healthcare needs, Hope Clinic provides a variety of resources such as flu shots, both prescribed and non-prescribed medication, dental care, food, water and many other necessities. Hope Clinic is dedicated and determined to safely help all members of the community,

despite any conflicts.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, homeless people are three to six times more likely to become ill than housed people. This is largely due to the fact that they are not receiving the care and resources that they need. It is important to acknowledge that having the resources to maintain good nutrition, personal hygiene and a safe environment is a privilege that is not available to all.

Over time, many ways to combat this have been developed. According to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, this includes communication, coordination and a targeted approach. By frequently interacting with unhoused people, linking them with the services they need and actively reaching out to them, we can improve and provide the care that homeless people need.

Although many people contribute and find ways to actively support the homeless population, most still choose to ignore the situation or believe they do not deserve help. As equal and vulnerable members of the community, we must set aside any bias or prejudice when it comes to helping those in need.

Everyone should have access to basic needs that are critical to our own health and well-being. In such a difficult time, we must be able to rely on each other for our physical and mental well-being. By reaching out to one another, we can ensure that we are all getting what we need. No one deserves to feel alone.

### **The slow but necessary remediation of years of housing injustice**

While the COVID-19 pandemic is still surging, one mustn't forget the pre-existing and longstanding problems in the United States, namely: gentrification and housing injustice. For those unaware of the term gentrification, gentrification is defined by Merriam Webster as "the process of repairing and rebuilding homes and businesses in a deteriorating area ... accompanied by an influx of middle-class or affluent people and that often results in the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents." Racial minorities are disproportionately affected. Under the cover of creating new public spaces, combating urban blight or bolstering economic development, public policy allows and often encourages the expulsion of racial minorities from their own homes.

Systemic racism has thrived in the housing market at the expense of

see **TWIST** next page ➡



# Goals intact despite year-long course correction

It has been a year since I started working for Groundcover News. It has been the best year of my life. I finally figured out how to build a strong foundation.

The very first article I wrote was about goals and rituals. I introduced the goals that I set and they were some big goals. Sometimes I feel people think my goals are too lofty. I just laugh in my head. You have to set massive, compelling goals to keep you on track.

Goal lists change; some things just don't work out. One goal that did not work out was going to school for 12 years to be a psychologist. My main goal is to revolutionize the drug rehab industry. Since I did not enjoy school, I started a pedicab business in March because I knew it would be difficult finding a job with no license and a criminal record. So I still have the same goals but I have to find a different path.

My goal is to create a drug rehab program that is not just a money-maker, which some are, but usually their success rates are poor. I want to get people back to zero. And teach them how to be entrepreneurs.

Now that my Boober Tours pedicab business has a motivational shop, I teach people how to set goals and work on them every day. This started when I was having difficulties with two of my crew members. I thought and thought about how to handle this situation. I thought about consequences, rules handbooks and everything that I have seen before. I eventually went back to my foundation principle: focus on the negative and get more negative, or focus on the positive and get more



**KEVIN SPANGLER**  
Groundcover vendor No. 307

positive. So, I came up with this goal class to build stronger crew members because if they are making decisions in line with their goals, I will never have to worry about issues.

This four-step process is from my very first article on goals and rituals and is timely since the New Year is coming up. This is one of the techniques that I use to shape my life for lasting change.

**Step 1:** Select an area in your life you want to improve and describe what that area is currently like for you. Be specific. I will use weight as an example because I used to weigh 300 pounds.

**Step 2:** Write down the rituals that have shaped your current conditions. Be honest. For example, I would wake up each morning and eat a few donuts, 8 eggs and toast. I'd eat deep fried potatoes, fast food, processed foods, I would eat massive meals right before bed, I drank beer, liquor, wine. I would over-consume every day. Even when I was not hungry I found myself stopping at these horrible fast food places.

**Step 3:** Write down what it is that you want. Be specific. I want a perfect

six-pack abdomen, I want to be healthy, I want all the chemicals in my body to be balanced, I want to lose 120 pounds, I want regular bowel movements, I want to learn as much as I can to help me lose this weight, I want to be happy, I want it to be simple.

**Step 4:** Write down rituals that will get you to your compelling vision. What would you need to do differently each day to get what you want? Will power does not work — rituals last a lifetime. My new ritual lifestyle of eating is: consume high-alkaline fruits only until noon; lunch is 70 percent live greens and veggies, 30 percent carbs such as potatoes or sweet potatoes; dinner is 70 percent veggies and greens, 30 percent protein of fish, chicken, or beef. Support local foods as much as possible. Divide my body weight, measured in pounds, by two and drink that much water in fluid ounces. Exercise on a regular basis (write a weekly schedule). Always pack my meals so I am prepared for my whole day. Only shop on the perimeter of the grocery store for whole foods, extremely minimal on dead foods. Increase my branch chain amino acids and omega fatty acids through hemp hearts. Believe I am healthy and I only make healthy decisions. Teach your taste buds to love wonderful, healthy foods.

I hope you found this article insightful and something to try instead of the year-after-year failures of the usual New Year's resolutions.

I would also like to thank everyone for their generous donations. I was able to build my pedicab company to seven cabs in seven months and have

seen one person get their license back and two people get off probation early. As for me, I have my own place and am paying my debts down every month. I am working on getting my license back, though I owe over \$17,000 in driver's responsibility fees. I used to see getting my license back as impossible but now I see it happening.

Now you've learned a little bit about one of the vendors for Groundcover News. Your donation helps a vendor in transition, like myself, get and maintain housing.

Boober Tours – the only way. If this article inspires you, call for a free ride: (734) 686-2087.

*Originally published in Groundcover News December, 2016*



Boober Tours pedicabs accommodate parties as well as commuters. Check monthly editions of Groundcover for updates on Kevin Spangler and Boober!

## ➡ TWIST from last page

minority homeowners. As proof of this, common illegal real-estate practices such as redlining, block-busting and steering have succeeded in circumscribing racial minorities into set areas that, ultimately, severely limit their wealth-building opportunities. So, while one might imagine the government to be entirely responsible, there is more to this issue than meets the eye. Faulty real-estate and lending etiquette with ulterior motives continue to be practiced at the expense of racial minorities.

As someone with a background in real-estate, albeit a relatively short one, I cannot sit idly by and watch the misdoings of others give all real-estate agents a bad reputation. Upon undergoing the required

training to get a real estate license, I quickly learned that the violation of rules against discrimination was a grievous offense, but didn't immediately understand why such a large portion of the training focused on what not to do. Quickly, however, the gravity of the situation surrounding discrimination in property sales became more apparent. I've come to understand that this is not an issue that should be taken lightly and is not one whose remedy can be implemented by any one person or legal act. To this end, I have steeled myself to enter a brokerage group of my choosing not only based on percentage sales commission or company reputation but also by my ability to promote racial fairness and professional sales etiquette to its surrounding members.

One of the organizations that has

sprouted around the country to address housing injustice and gentrification is Staying Power, a youth arts program that has amassed "young leaders in ... communities [who work] to preserve culture and use creative approaches to defend affordable housing." To meet this overarching challenge, art and poetry projects by youth poets from Richmond, Calif. and Ypsilanti, Mich. have connected with political strategies. Through weekly workshops and poet-led instruction in both song and writing, participants "come to see their power as agents for change, building a national network of youth-led arts activism around issues of housing and racial justice."

While this is just one example of one organization that has responded to the issues I presented, I believe we are not short-handed in the number

of people who are willing to see these issues that have plagued our country for all too long come to a much-needed end.

In our ever-changing society, many issues arise from time to time that can affect our communities both positively and negatively. How we go about choosing to solve or ignore these issues is fundamental to our progression as humans. The problems surrounding climate change, access to health care and gentrification offer only a glimpse of many equally important issues that continue to plague the vulnerable. We've come to acknowledge the power and urgency of organizing people with the shared passion for overcoming these issues no matter how seemingly insurmountable they are. That being said, will *you* do your part?



# Intersecting paths: strangers journey to identity

## U-M student contributors

Identity: one of the loudest and most overt themes of Groundcover News articles over the last decade. Groundcover has given a voice to the voiceless and offered them an opportunity to tell their truth. We, three women of color

at the University of Michigan, are on our paths to discovering our identity with you. We are on a journey with an unknown destination and we want to share our voices and stories.

Sharing our stories with one another was an intimate experience — yet before a couple weeks ago, we knew

nothing more than each other's first names. Even now, the extent of our knowledge of each other is mostly the contents of this essay. Our backgrounds are an amalgamation of diverse experiences, of grappling with our identities in a world where society is quick to label and divide. Despite all

of this, our journeys have brought us to a shared exploration of identity and what that means to each of us. We hope that some part of our piece resonates with you or provides insight into the life of a student of color at the University of Michigan and in the larger Ann Arbor community.



Sarah



Hannah



Ava

## Invisible alien in Ann Arbor

### SARAH AKAABOUNE

Over the years, Groundcover has shared sharp articulations of who Ann Arbor citizens are, but I have chosen to speak out about the blurred lines of identity — something seemingly opposite of their powerful sense of self. Some individuals in the Asian-American community live extremely “Westernized,” assimilated lives, while others lead lives in accordance with “traditional” Asian culture. Being part of this community myself, I want to take a deeper look at my experience of finding meaning in a community when the lines of society aren't so clear.

I grew up in the town of Brighton, roughly 30 minutes north of Ann Arbor. I have lived there since I was adopted from China at 11 months old. Throughout my childhood I grew to forget that I didn't look like my White classmates. However, college application season began to roll around and I was reminded that I was in fact different — I wasn't White. My friends would joke, “Oh yeah, I forget that you're even Asian!”

I never knew how to respond: was their forgetfulness a good thing? Or did they imply I was callous for forgetting and failing to represent my race? On the other hand, peers would comment, “You're totally at an advantage in the application process since you're a minority.” Again, I didn't know what to make of this comment. It got me thinking about how I was becoming an invisible alien in a group of Americans who check “Asian” in the ethnicity section of legal forms.

Defining myself as an invisible alien has helped me voice the conflicting feelings I had with my identity both as an individual and ethnically. In every physical respect, I am Asian; I have dark, almond shaped eyes and

straight dark hair. Thus, people are quick to group me that way but I don't always feel like I fit into their perception. I have lived almost my entire life here and I consider that to be a huge part of who I am. I am a U.S. citizen with a Chinese background, yet only the latter part of my identity shows.

In the 2019-20 school year, 94% of enrolled students at my high school identified themselves as White. However, I was accompanied by only 1% checking that Asian box under the ethnicity section. Transitioning to the University of Michigan and the larger Ann Arbor community was a stark contrast to that experience. While the reported demographics of both the University and Ann Arbor show a large portion of the population being White, Asians are 15.5% and 17.3% of those populations, respectively. In an instant, I went from being surrounded by White peers to seeing faces that look like my own all the time. But for some reason, something still didn't feel right.

Unexpectedly, I found a voice for those feelings in Los Angeles Times article that focuses on a podcast about the struggles of being Asian-American; they articulate that so many Asian Americans “...have spoken of not being Asian enough and not being seen as American. If we all feel this way, maybe we're having the wrong kind of conversation.”

Hearing those words lifted a weight off my shoulders; I wasn't alone. Feeling like I could finally free myself from the confusion and struggle of labels, I realized that I don't have to be a measured amount of Asian or American. I can be both and be proud of that. It is time to address the unfair and restrictive labels Asian-Americans deal with all the time.

## Ann Arbor's best kept secret

### HANNAH MOMBLANCO

My grandmother died three days before my freshman year of college and my mother's grief was loud, the kind of grief that shatters mirrors and cracks concrete. In Morocco, grief is never a solitary practice, it is collective. Schools shut down, windows are shuttered, peaches are no longer sold by the kilogram for the day.

A man gives up a reserved plot before noon so my grandmother can be buried next to my grandfather. Our friends, women who have soon become the closest thing to family in this country, flood our home and our backyard. They come every day, lining up in our driveway, in our front lawn, and on our porch. They cry because they feel every ounce of our pain while neighbors walk by with golden retrievers and poodles, the special sort of yip-yappy dog that can never seem to keep from biting ankles. They are laden with pots of food, prayers and love. Our grief becomes intertwined with theirs and it is heavy and stifling and felt so deeply and rawly; in essence, we have lost our final connection to the homeland.

Much more deeply, though, these women represent Ann Arbor's best kept secret. In their entirety, they embody the quintessential immigrant struggle, the tooth-and-nail battle for a fragment of the American dream. They are indestructible, independent, heart bigger-than-the-sky Moroccan women. During a time of uncertainty, their interactions take place on a group chat, simply dubbed, “Moroccan Ladies.” They share encouraging notes, concerns over ever-growing immigration restrictions, prayers, reminders that because of the rain the party would now be moved from here to there, and to please bring plastic cutlery to the cook-out, constitute this space. To the average onlooker, their communications may seem mundane, reflecting nothing more than the inner workings of a middle-aged woman; but to me, they reveal a certain sort of beauty. Beauty in the fight to make a name for themselves, beauty in \$9.75 an hour from scanning boxes of cereal to pay for flight tickets back to Morocco, beauty in plans on creased notebook paper to one day return to school, and most importantly, beauty in comfort from shared pain and loss. I am the proud daughter of one of these women, and my identity is defined by carrying on their painstakingly crafted legacy against all odds.

see **IDENTITY** page 15 ➡



# Women speak in a man's world

## U-M student contributors

### EMILY AZHARI



Who is the modern-day Washtenaw County Woman? Yes, women come in different colors, shapes and sizes, but answering this question becomes even more complex when we look at the various identities within the city.

I was very much inspired by a Groundcover vendor named Tabitha, whose story was highlighted in the Fall 2018 Women's Issue. I recognize many of Tabitha's realities are not my realities, and as a U-M student, I am looking into this narrative from a place of privilege. Her story is incomparable to mine, and her path of great resilience has made her an incredibly strong woman, despite being physically small like myself. Physically, women are already placed at a disadvantage. As Tabitha mentioned in the 2018 issue, "being a woman, I'm not physically as strong as a man."

Even in a "safe" city like Ann Arbor, violence against women remains a pressing issue. Tabitha's "sister Crystal was just murdered out on the streets" and "was also raped by a man that she had trusted while she was asleep outside one night," a few years ago. In a prominent college town, as of 2019, "[u]ndergraduate women reported experiencing non-consensual contact since enrolling at U-M at a rate of 34.3%," according to a 2019 U-M survey. This rate is likely twice as high for homeless women, whose only place of refuge is the store Tabitha was selling around.

At night, I either walk clutching pepper spray or in groups. In a man's world, both Tabitha and I try to travel with physically stronger male-figures that we trust. Tabitha claimed she "had to run for [her] life" from those trying to pursue her for prostitution. She had to put up with sexual harassment from McDonald's management because she "needed the job" and "had children at home to take care of." Nowadays, one might expect that women would feel empowered to speak up, but Tabitha's very survival prevented her from doing so. As she put it in her 2019 Groundcover article, "anything can happen and it is very

scary out here in this world — definitely when you're homeless."

When not fighting for her safety, the Washtenaw County Woman keeps herself busy through her work, as she strives to make a living in a variety of professions. Tabitha and I have differing views on what a woman's place in society is, which can be attributed to our respective situations. She believes "a woman should be inside taking care of the family, in the house... but it's not possible nowadays." She also understands that "both parties need an income to raise a family." As a female nursing student, I'm working hard to earn a degree and make an independent income that could rival a man's, as I don't plan to become a housewife. I've found that the modern-day Washtenaw County Woman — regardless of her looks or background — is a hard-working woman, trying to make a living. Being a woman, she is up against the odds and must fight for her survival. Nonetheless, she is strong, resilient and can accomplish anything she puts her mind to.

### PAULINE DROEGE



The #MeToo movement made waves in 2017 when women on social media, including celebrities such as Alyssa Milano, Gwyneth Paltrow and Jennifer Lawrence, came forward to highlight their experiences with sexual harassment. The movement empowered thousands of women to come forward and speak up, providing support to many. But was the #MeToo movement inclusive of everyone who wanted to come forward?

In the 2018 Women's Voices Issue of Groundcover News, special editor Laurie Wechter wrote, "While the women's movement has made important strides, one area that has received relatively little public attention is the plight of homeless women." A 2017 study from the Women's Needs Assessment Report stated that out of 434 women who experienced homelessness or housing instability in Washington D.C., 76% experienced violence, 19% experienced partner sexual assault at some point in their lives, and 21% experienced sexual abuse by a relative.

So who exactly gets to decide who's a

part of these movements? We do.

The #MeToo movement was started in 2006 by survivor and activist Tarana Burke. But the movement only became widespread when in 2017 it went viral on social media sites, mainly Twitter. American actress Alyssa Milano was one of the first to popularize the hashtag. On October 15, 2017, she tweeted, "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet. ... Me too." Celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Gabrielle Union and Debra Messing quickly echoed the same chilling — "Me too." Milano later tweeted that same month, "One tweet has brought together 1.7 million voices from 85 countries. Standing side by side, together, our movement will only grow."

Everyday women of all backgrounds came forward to share their stories, but some were empowered more than others. The stories that became especially viral were mostly from celebrities who had the platform and means to speak to a large audience, and we, the audience, supported them. However, following the event, all celebrities except one received more mentions in the media than the activists they brought along. Similarly, Tarana Burke has had much less social media attention than many of these celebrities, despite having founded the movement.

Homeless women should have been on the forefront of the #MeToo movement, but they didn't receive enough public attention because of their lack of platform and inclusion in the media. We should have given these women the platform they deserve to share their stories.

Now in 2020, three years after the #MeToo movement's wide spread, the movement has come to a lull. While most women now feel more empowered to disclose their experiences with sexual violence, there still isn't enough support legally. In 2017, the ME TOO bill, S.2159 was introduced to Congress. This bill would change the way the government treats sexual harassment complaints, require annual training in the Senate and House, and give interns the same workplace protections as full-time staff. This bill has not yet been passed.

As the hashtag and movement continue to quiet, homeless women, as well as other marginalized groups, are still at risk and still facing disproportionate levels of violence.

As you consider the many facets of the #MeToo movement, we urge you to think about your own role in this movement and others. How will you give a voice to the voiceless?

### ALEXIS SMITH

August 18, 1920 symbolized a pivotal

win in the endless fight for women's voices as the 19th Amendment was enacted. Since then, many women have strived to eradicate sexism while struggling through a culture where women still stand behind their husbands, not next to them as equals.

In the 2018 Women's Voices Issue of Groundcover News, an article by Will Shakespeare states, "The deep roots of #MeToo: A history of the Suffragette movement" by Will Shakespeare, states



"the 19th Amendment and women's rising political power have changed the world, and will continue to make a difference, so long as they are safeguarded and put to use."

Many female populations around the world have thrived by exercising the right to vote and protest, yet a very neglected population has been overlooked for far too long. Due to the lack of voting education and ability to obtain proper identification in many states, homeless women in America have been ignored in the discussion around voting rights. This must change now.

Albeit having many positive changes achieved in American voting history like the Help America Vote Act of 2002 and the recent statewide flexibility allowing addresses or locations of overnight sleeping locations such as shelters, street corners and parks to be used in voter registrations, homeless women still lack the means to obtain identification necessary to vote without being pulled aside to sign an affidavit. In America now, two-thirds of states expect citizens to provide identification to be allowed to vote at polls. The other one-third have programs set in place regarding statements of authentication, the use of notaries and many more alternatives. For example, the state of Michigan encourages voting by allowing the signing of an affidavit when no ID is accessible.

While obtaining ID appears to be simple upfront, a homeless individual is forced to jump through many hurdles to





**Left:** Derek Allen's favorite dance is the jitterbug. Most people don't know that he makes music and produces songs. **Right:** Susan Beckett and Joe Woods take a break to do Joe's favorite dance, the swing, during Groundcover's outdoor office hours. Joe is a self proclaimed science nerd who loves astronomy, earth science and meteorology.


# Dancing on the streets: vendors share go-to moves

## GROUNDCOVER STAFF

Guess who! Try and match these vendors to their favorite dances and fun facts.



**TONY S.**  
Groundcover vendor No. 9



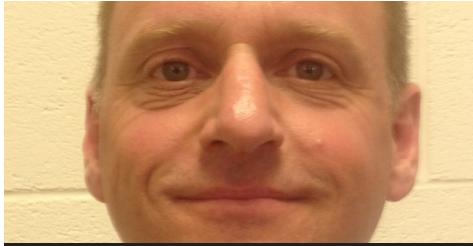
**ELIZABETH "LIT" KURTZ**  
Groundcover vendor No. 159



**PAULA ANDERSON**  
Groundcover vendor No. 157



**SCHILLINGTON MORGAN**  
Groundcover vendor No. 148



**JIM CLARK**  
Groundcover vendor No. 139



**CINDY GERE**  
Groundcover vendor No. 279

**Groundcover vendor A**  
**Favorite dance:** Being Native American, traditional powwow is my favorite dancing to watch; the unity round dance is my favorite to do.  
**Interesting fact:** People probably don't know that I love lamb meat with a little mint on the side, especially prepared in the Middle Eastern style.

**Groundcover vendor B**  
**Favorite dance:** I just love to move! I have recently gotten into modern line dances like the Cha-Cha slide and the Soulja Boy.  
**Interesting fact:** I LOVE basketball, you can often find me shooting hoops, even if just with paper to the waste bin. When I was young I took a job at the library over joining the school team, but all of my friends were on the team and I continued to play with them. The Colorado Lady Huskies is my favorite team as I briefly lived in Colorado and the team is largely undefeated.

**Groundcover vendor C**  
**Favorite dance:** I like all the dances, including those they did on Soul Train, but ballroom is my favorite.  
**Interesting fact:** Lots of people don't know that I like to listen to religious talk shows on the radio.

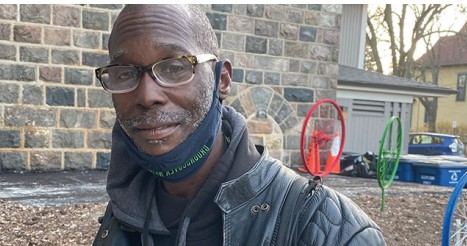
**Groundcover vendor D**  
**Favorite dance:** I like slow dancing.  
**Interesting fact:** Lots of people don't know that I am an animal lover.

**Groundcover vendor E**  
**Favorite dance:** I like rock and roll fast-dancing.  
**Interesting fact:** People don't know that I like playing Bingo on Facebook.

**Groundcover vendor F**  
**Favorite dance:** Bollywood is primary, salsa is back-up.  
**Interesting fact:** I know sign language.

ANSWERS: A, Cindy Gere, B, Lit Kurtz, C, Schillington Morgan, D, Tony S., E, Paula Anderson, F, Jim Clark





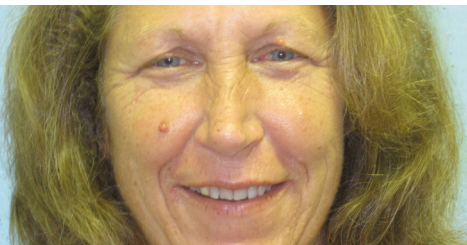
**LARZEL WASHINGTON**  
Groundcover vendor No. 128

**Favorite dance:** Breakdancing.  
**Interesting fact:** World history buff, currently focused on the 1898 fall of Nicholas II of Russia to current-day history. States that he could be a preacher and enjoys spending his time talking to others



**HEATHER FEATHER**  
Groundcover vendor No. 45

**Favorite dance:** I love so many dances — my favorite is when someone surprises me with a dance they love.  
**Interesting fact:** People don't know that my grandma taught me every dance from the two-step to the waltz and I love them all.



**SHELLEY DENEVE**  
Groundcover vendor No. 22

**Favorite dance:** I like dancing to disco music. It takes me back to an era where I felt free and the beat moved me like no other music had before.  
**Interesting fact:** No one knows I'm a native Ann Arborite. Born and raised here in A2.



**FRED ALLEN**  
Groundcover vendor No. 170

**Favorite dance:** I'm not much of a dancer but rock and roll is probably my favorite.  
**Interesting fact:** I'm a football fan and I help homeless people as a MISSION Board member.



**MICHAEL LONG**  
Groundcover vendor No. 422

**Favorite dance:** The original hustle by Van McCoy.  
**Interesting fact:** He is quiet and prefers to stick to himself, as he is then out of risk of doing the things he is healing from (drinking, drugs, etc.). He had been homeless for a long time and believes with all that he has gone through, it's a miracle that he's still living.



**HAL KLENK**  
Groundcover vendor No. 88

**Favorite dance:** Waltz.  
**Interesting fact:** Most people don't know that I'm a 76-year-old Vietnam vet taking a class sponsored by Chapter 30 of the Viet Nam Vets of Ann Arbor.



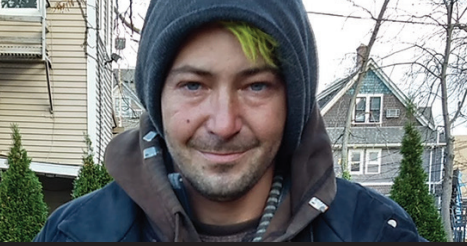
**CHRIS E.**  
Groundcover vendor No. 483

**Favorite dance:** Salsa makes for a fun night.  
**Interesting fact:** People might not know that I used to be a bit of a "joker and a putdowner."



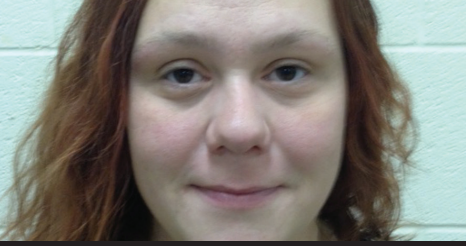
**LONNIE BAKER**  
Groundcover vendor No. 99

**Favorite dance:** The Harlem Shake and I'm a master. I can shake like one of those young boys.  
**Interesting fact:** I've been practicing this and I use it for aerobic exercise, and it works!



**JAMES M.**  
Groundcover vendor No. 16

**Favorite dance:** Mosh pit dancing.  
**Interesting fact:** I know so much about music; I'd be a great amateur deejay.



**JENNIFER B**  
Groundcover vendor No. 115

**Favorite dance:** Swing.  
**Interesting fact:** People might not know that I am funny and kind.

**TABITHA L.**  
Groundcover vendor No. 360  
**Favorite dance:** I always wished I could do ballet.  
**Interesting fact:** People don't know that I am extremely shy and don't like asking for help.

**HAILU SHITAYE**  
Groundcover vendor No. 205  
**Favorite dance:** Escista is an Ethiopian dance that I am professional at — if anyone wants a lesson it will be about \$50 per hour.  
**Interesting fact:** Most people don't know I play bass guitar.

**DENISE SHEARER**  
Groundcover vendor No. 485  
**Favorite dance:** I'm not a good dancer, but I like to dance. I like to wave my hands in the air.  
**Interesting fact:** People might not know that I really care about people. And I really like Charlie Brown & Peanuts, Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood and Mr. Roger's Neighborhood shows because they're relaxing and they cheer me up.

**KEVIN SPANGLER**  
Groundcover vendor No. 307  
**Favorite dance:** Funky dancing.  
**Interesting fact:** People might not know that I work about 100 hours per week and I live by the Japanese principle of kaisin — helping people all the time.

**WILL SHAKESPEARE**  
Groundcover vendor No. 298  
**Favorite dance:** Samba.  
**Interesting fact:** I am an educator, called upon to share all different pieces of knowledge. What I learns, I give.



# GEO: Fighting for us all

**ALEX ZHANG,  
ATIYA FAROOQUE AND  
SHAAN PATEL**  
U-M student contributors

In a turbulent, uncertain time, we must take a step back and reflect. We must look at our current moment, and consider how much we depend on the members of Ann Arbor to welcome us into their community. We must look to the future, recognize those that could use our support, and start to advocate for their rights.

As college students it's certainly easy, and all too simple, to think that our influence and duty end at the borders of our campus. However, we must look beyond ourselves and see what our campus really is. After all, it's more than buildings, dorms and classrooms — it's about the people in those buildings, dorms and classrooms. And hence, this larger community, our community, is one that we have a duty to protect.

Groups such as the Graduate Employees' Organization, or GEO, have already been promoting causes and advocating for change that benefits our community. Understanding GEO's past and recent work can show how members of the community are not only able, but also obligated, to make lasting change for themselves and their community.

Founded in 1970, Ann Arbor GEO's roots are embedded in a rich history of collective bargaining, action and advocacy, with the goal of building social and economic justice within the greater Ann Arbor community. Although initially powerless, GEO engaged in a four year struggle for certification and eventually emerged victorious as the sole bargaining agent for all Graduate Student Assistants. After successfully negotiating their first contract in 1975, GEO's mission progressed further, leading to significant achievements such as tuition waivers, health benefits, childcare waivers, transparent hiring processes, and the protection of their members' rights in many other ways. GEO has also become affiliated with over 10 other unions and organizations, of which the most notable are: The American Federation of Teachers, The Lecturers' Employees Organization and Washtenaw Regional Organizing Committee, also known as WeROC. Along with its history of impressive accomplishments, GEO continues to serve as a powerful collective voice for all Graduate Student Instructors and Assistants.

As a pivotal advocacy organization in Ann Arbor, GEO uses its voice to better our community. A prime

example of this, made all the more relevant by the upcoming elections, was their 2018 electoral endorsements in local legislatures. At the time, GEO promoted candidate Paul Brown for U-M Board of Regents, and candidate Jack Eaton for Ann Arbor Mayor. This decision was based on both candidates' historical support for labor unions and their commitment to safe and inclusive environments both on and off campus. However, GEO also asserted their negative opinions on both Eaton and Brown's respective agendas for police expansion. Through their efforts, GEO provided people in Ann Arbor with an accessible way to make more informed decisions affecting the communities they live in.

GEO has helped educate voters

oversight, deweaponization, a reallocation of social-service resources and overall restructuring in an attempt to protect the working rights and safety of Ann Arbor community members. In the wake of recent Black Lives Matter protests calling for justice for police brutality and reallocation of police funding, GEO's foresight couldn't be clearer. GEO advocated for Black lives before the movement received national attention, and continued to do so in 2020. At the start of this semester at the University of Michigan, AAPD announced an increase in policing in the name of public health and surveillance. GEO responded by publicly denouncing this effort and again called for police deweaponization. In addition to advocating for the

*The decision by grad students to withhold labor is motivated in large part to ensure the health and safety of our students, as well as the health and safety of instructors, staff, and members of the University of Michigan Community as well as residents of the city of Ann Arbor. With all of this in mind, I want to emphasize that this is not an attempt to shut you all out of this process.*

The safety and working conditions of GEO are interconnected with our lives as students and community members, especially during this pandemic. Their goals, such as increasing COVID testing and holding the police accountable, protect us too. They strove to make their demands clear to students through posters, social media and direct contact through emails. GEO also expressed solidarity for students at risk. GEO's overall outreach to undergraduates brought a lot of clarity in a time where the administration was leaving undergraduates feeling taken-for-granted and uninformed.

On campus, the necessity of GEO efforts is obvious. As students on campus, it is clear that university administration maintains a lax position on their pandemic response, both by failing to administer mandatory COVID testing and tracing, and by disregarding the physical sanitation and security of our residential dorms, common areas and restrooms across campus. Classes have shifted almost entirely online, yet administration has still encouraged students to come to an unsafe campus. Simultaneously, the administration, rather than financially compensating students to accommodate such a shift in educational format on top of campus safety concerns, instead imposed a tuition increase of 1.9%. Within our first few weeks of the semester, our classes got cancelled for one to two weeks due to unsurprising, yet preventable, GEO strikes.

What a crazy fall semester it has been for us, for our teachers, for our workers and community partners. Some ask: what cost do we incur for losing these two weeks of valuable Zoom classes? Instead, we ask: What do we owe GEO for protecting the physical and financial security of us undergraduate students, our staff and of course our local Ann Arbor communities?

GEO made us feel worth fighting for — because we are. And in turn, we will take inspiration from GEO and fight for others — fight for our community. Because they are worth it too.



through endorsement, cooperation and education. Through op-ed pieces and social media campaigns, GEO is able to amplify important reporting of local races and GEO collective opinion. In turn, GEO uses these digital mediums to help disseminate ever-so relevant local electoral information for affected communities to access and digest. Spreading awareness about candidates' stances, helps others feel empowered to select the community leadership at every level, from Ann Arbor, to Michigan, to the United States at large.

Beyond providing accessible electoral information, GEO has repeatedly demanded intrinsic reform within the Ann Arbor Police Department. In 2018, GEO stressed greater civilian

lives of its workers, GEO displays the same active support for members of the wider community.

As students just beginning our college career, the GEO strike has quickly exposed us to the issues that face our community. We can no longer profess ignorance, and our college experience will be marked by both disillusionment and a call to action. When many of our classes were cancelled and the graduate students were not working, some students felt that they were facing the consequences for problems they did not cause. However, GEO members emphasized that they were not acting despite us, they were acting for us. In a letter to undergraduates, GEO members issued the following statement:



# Together we are strong

**BEN GIRODIAS**

**Groundcover contributor**

In a time of great uncertainty, I, like many others, looked to the University of Michigan administration to take important steps both to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to end police violence against marginalized peoples, especially given how racial inequality has been at the forefront of the American consciousness this summer. But my trust was misplaced.

The U-M administration's reckless reopening plan endangers human life. As stated in a leaked document from the U-M president's own COVID-19 Committee on Ethics and Privacy, the likely hot spots will disproportionately harm communities of color and other vulnerable populations, such as the homeless. Instead of listening, the administration ignored its constituents, the surrounding community and expert public health advice.

Alarmingly, we have started the semester without a robust testing plan, which is particularly dangerous with a large group of asymptomatic young people. In just the first two weeks, despite low testing, over 10% of on-campus students had to be quarantined and the dance building was closed. The positivity rate on the U-M COVID-19 dashboard has been rising quickly but updated only weekly. We are seeing all

the warning signs of a COVID-19 outbreak.

The virus is not the only thing that disproportionately affects communities of color. The police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and so many others serve as a tragic reminder that policing is a public health issue. The American Public Health Association warns that over-policing leads to both physical and psychological trauma in marginalized communities. As a society, we must look beyond our violent and systematically racist approach. We should urgently consider defunding the police to invest in direly needed social services and support that actually reduce crime.

These were the main reasons that the Graduate Employee Organization went on strike at the start of the fall semester. The graduate students did so only as a last resort. GEO desperately tried to resolve our concerns through both official channels and protests during the entire summer. All these dire calls for action went unheeded. The unresponsive administration failed us and the surrounding community.

We demand better. We demand a safe and just campus; a robust testing system, expanded childcare, financial support for our members, administrative support for our international students, demilitarized campus police, reallocation of 50% of the campus



On September 11, protesters organized by Students Demand Representation and the Graduate Employees' Organization marched from the Michigan Union to Mosher-Jordan dining hall and back in solidarity with striking University of Michigan Residence Advisors and M-Dining undergraduate student workers. Photo credit: Emily Tamulewicz.

police budget to community-based justice initiatives, and cutting ties with both AAPD and ICE.

In the face of these dangers, I am heartened by the way the graduate students stood together for our community. We stood in solidarity with the Residential Advisors who went on a wildcat strike against the dangerous conditions the university administration placed them in. We are so grateful for the trades unions who refused to cross our picket lines on various construction sites across campus. We are thankful for the financial and logistical support we received from people all across the country.

Graduate students held the picket lines through the pouring rain. Others took to online spaces producing vast collections of information, educating the community about the immediacy of our demands. We marched through the streets demanding change. In this short amount of time I have learned so much, but above all, this strike has taught me that individually I am weak, but through solidarity, we are strong. Together, and only together, we can build a better world for all of us.

*Originally published in Groundcover News October, 2020*

## Bargaining with U-M

**PHIL BIANCO**

**Groundcover contributor**

Beginning on November 16, six members of the Graduate Employees' Organization will sit across the table from representatives of the University of Michigan to negotiate a new contract. GEO's current contract expires in May 2017.

GEO is a labor union that represents graduate employees, notably Graduate Student Instructors and Graduate Student Staff Assistants. The current contract was negotiated in 2013, before Michigan's so-called Right-To-Work legislation took effect. As a result, this will be the first time GEO negotiates under Right-to-Work laws.

Under Michigan legislation, fair share service fees can no longer be part of employment contracts. These fees, which all workers in the bargaining unit must pay regardless of union

membership, cover the expense of bargaining and enforcing the contract. Once they are removed from the contract, only workers who join the union will pay, although non-union members still receive the benefits the union has won.

GEO is pursuing various other modifications, as determined by responses to a member-wide survey and discussions at the organization's General Membership Meetings, to accompany this state-mandated change to the contract. "Since we're a democratic organization, it's the members who decide what the bargaining team's priorities will be," said John Ware, the president of GEO.

Ware explained that this year's negotiation will focus on "trying to make employment at the University for graduate students fair, inclusive, equitable and accessible." Ware gave the examples of improving childcare support for graduate students who are parents; helping international students who are required to take English classes shoulder the cost of arriving to the University early; and ensuring GSIs and GSSAs receive a living wage.

Ware also cited the union's interest in potentially working with the University's

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiative, which was released in October. "It frequently falls to graduate students to make sure that things like that happen, and that work is generally done unpaid and it often falls on already marginalized people to do that extra work to try to make sure that the university is an accessible and inclusive place for them. So the other priority we have is to get that work, which is critical to the functioning of the university, compensated."

For Ware, economic issues are also issues of inclusivity and accessibility. "If graduate education is to be accessible, you have to be able to get by as a graduate student whether or not you can rely on family wealth, whether or not you have debt from undergrad, and that means you have to make a living wage, you have to have good insurance." Those economic issues are also issues of access and equity.

Supporters of GEO can help the bargaining process in several ways. Most important, according to Ware, is to stay informed, which members can do by attending membership meetings and bargaining sessions and by reading GEO's communications. Non-members, meanwhile, can "like" GEO's Facebook

page. "Anybody can and should 'like' and follow the Facebook page, and when there are opportunities for members of the community to stand with us in solidarity, we'll make sure to get the word out there on social media and hopefully also in other ways."

Denise Bailey, a staff organizer at GEO, emphasized that getting membership to meetings will be extremely important to the bargaining process. "We're just going to be in constant turnout mode soon," she said at a recent officer/staff meeting for the organization.

At 40 years old, GEO is one of the oldest unions representing graduate employees in the country. This articulation of members as graduate employees, rather than simply graduate students, is central to the union's mission. "Even though we graduate students are students, we are also workers," said Ware. "And as a general matter, when people work, they ought to be paid a living wage."

*Originally published in Groundcover News November, 2016*



# National revitalization efforts form the basis for local proposals

**OLIVIA LOCKHART, REAGAN RECCHIA AND MORRISON SCHMIDT**  
U-M student contributors

Access to safe and affordable housing has been an issue that has long plagued the United States, yet Ann Arbor itself tends to be thought of as a “wealthy city.” With a nationally ranked university and an average household income of almost six figures, how can one not look at Ann Arbor as a booming hub of success and wealth? Despite this assumption, Ann Arbor has a real housing problem with staggeringly increasing rent rates and an underserved homeless population.

Government officials have aimed to fix this problem for years. Specifically, 10 years ago, a plan was proposed by the Obama administration called “PETRA.” There were massive Ann Arbor citizen concerns. Ann Arbor citizens are now embarking on an action plan of their own, starting with the passage of Proposal C — the Ann Arbor Affordable Housing millage in November of 2020.

Very low-income American families rely on housing assistance to survive. According to the National Housing Law Project, a nonprofit organization committed to housing justice, in 2010, there were “1.2 million public housing units that serve vulnerable families ...” in the United States, most of those being low-income families. This is a huge group of citizens that we need to protect. Yet from 1995-2010, the United States lost public housing stock at an alarming rate. We were also facing an economic downturn and billions of dollars worth of unmet capital needs.

In 2010, then-President Barack Obama decided change was needed in the public/private housing situation. Obama and the Department of Housing and Urban Development proposed “PETRA,” or the Preservation, Enhancement and Transformation of Rental Assistance Act, a \$350 million plan to preserve and improve public housing. PETRA did not mandate the program, but the Department of Housing and Urban Development assumed there would be many participants.

Despite the obvious need for serious change, this proposal did not make citizens happy, including those in Ann Arbor. In the article titled “Revitalize to privatize? Critics say Obama’s public housing plan needs rewiring,” published in the Seattle street paper *Real Change*, writer Cydney Gillis summarized citizens’ fears that public housing

authorities would mortgage and take out private loans on public property. Many people were also concerned because these public housing authorities would have the ability to leverage billions in additional private investments. Another major concern from residents was that rent levels would rise above market rates. We are now 10 years beyond 2010 and able to see if some of their predictions about PETRA were correct.

Tenant concerns surrounding PETRA were temporarily alleviated, as Congress never formally introduced PETRA. Edits and program changes to PETRA continued throughout the latter half of 2010. The original version of PETRA became the Rental Housing Revitalization Act (FY12) that was introduced in the House of Representatives in December by Democratic Representative Keith Ellison of Minnesota.

The final iteration of the Rental Housing Revitalization Act included numerous critical adaptations to the earliest PETRA bill. Firstly, and most notably, the PETRA bill initially requested \$350 million for revitalization efforts and an additional \$50 million for “for services to promote resident mobility.” The final Rental Housing Revitalization Act omitted this additional funding to decrease the bill’s potential expenditure. The number of revitalized units dropped in the Rental Housing Revitalization Act from 300,000 units to 263,000 units. Such changes were made to correct perceived overconfidence in the number of housing units that could be realistically updated.

The Rental Housing Revitalization Act was never passed by Congress. Attempts at national revitalization under the Obama Administration did not stop at the Rental Housing Revitalization Act. The Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative of 2010 permitted local governments to integrate funds from various departments and capitalize on NRI grants to improve living standards and opportunities in public and private low-income neighborhoods and areas.

Unfortunately, the integration of many agencies and subcommittees did not alleviate housing distress in many of the communities it aimed to help. A 2016 report, *Revitalizing Neighborhoods: The Federal Role*, noted that “Congressional inaction played some part in the lack of progress.”

Many anxieties surrounding privatization of public housing, increasing

# Revitalize to privatize? Critics say Obama’s plan needs rewiring

**CYDNEY GILLIS**  
*Real Change contributor*

The idea has raised hackles among public-housing tenants who say that, far from saving the nation’s low-income units in the long run, Obama’s fix would subject government-owned properties to foreclosure and put 30-year “use agreements” on public housing that would lead to mass sell-offs when they expire.

The plan is in legislation called the Preservation, Enhancement and Transformation of Rental Assistance Act of 2010, a \$350 million proposal that the Department of Housing and Urban Development introduced in Congress last month. PETRA would allow public housing authorities to do something they can’t do now: Mortgage or take out private loans on public property.

The money would be used to start fixing an estimated national backlog of \$20 billion to \$30 billion in repairs that’s grown due to federal underfunding and will, HUD says, only lead to more demolition if left unchecked.

PETRA would allow owners of public or private HUD subsidized housing to do something else that worries tenants: raise their rent levels, on paper, to market rate - in some cases, 10% more than market rate. Tenants would still pay only 30% of their income in rent under the proposal, but the federal government would make up the rest in increased subsidies to a building to generate enough cash flow to aract loans — as long as Congress keeps funding PETRA.

The legislation also puts no cap on how much interest a bank can charge.

“It’s going to mean a necessary increase in HUD subsidies,” says Rick Harrison, one of two Seale Housing Authority tenants invited to give HUD input on the bill in Washington, D.C., earlier this year. But, “If down the road, they lose their subsidies or there’s a cutback in them and they’ve borrowed money based on the higher income, they’re going to be in a world of hurt.”

In a hearing before the House Financial Services Committee on May 25, Chairman Barney Frank and Rep. Maxine Waters grilled HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan about the possibility of privatization. But even

in foreclosure, David Lipsetz, a HUD senior policy advisor, said June 18 in a phone conference with housing advocates in Seale, D.C. and New York, PETRA’s 30-year use agreements would ensure the number of units and rent remain the same if a private owner were to acquire a bankrupt property.

“In the here and now,” said Linda Couch, deputy director of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, “there’s nothing to stop the continued hemorrhaging of public housing - one reason the coalition is working to make changes in the bill, which is expected to undergo major revisions before Frank’s committee takes it up again,” she said. The NLIHC and the National Alliance of HUD Tenants want to see a requirement that repairs be made to the buildings borrowed against — something that isn’t in the bill now, Couch said — and a guarantee of permanent affordability. And, “We believe there should be no use agreement whatsoever in the PETRA bill,” said Judy Montanez, a board member with the HUD tenant group.

For public housing authorities, whose mission it is to provide low-income rentals, the privatization issue is “a bit of a red herring,” said Bob Watson, deputy director of the King County Housing Authority. Most lenders, he said, don’t want to foreclose on properties with covenants.

If Congress approves the \$350 million in funding for phase one of PETRA, Lipsetz said the new subsidies should facilitate loans and upgrades for 280,000 units in fiscal 2011.

Few of them would be in Seale. HUD considers KCHA and the Seale Housing Authority high-performing agencies that are allowed to sell tax credits to private investors. As a result, Seale has already redeveloped or refurbished most of its properties, entering them into private partnerships that relinquish ownership aer 15 years.

“It’s going to mean a necessary increase in HUD subsidies,” said local tenant Rick Harrison, but if housing authorities “lose their subsidies or there’s a cutback... they’re going to be a world of hurt.”

*Originally published by Real Change in 2010. © www.street-newsservice.org*



# Eviction and racial discrimination: from slavery to COVID-19

*"A growing body of national research ... suggests that eviction is not merely a symptom of poverty but also a cause of it. People who experience eviction are more likely to lose their jobs, experience increased rates of depression, and rate their health as fair or poor"*

— U-M Ford School of Public Policy (May 2020)



**WILL SHAKESPEARE**  
Groundcover vendor No. 258

On Aug. 5, Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced, "Today, I declared racism to be a public health crisis in Michigan and created the Black Leadership Advisory Council." She used the hashtag #COVID-19 and highlighted what Black and brown communities have always known — inequities caused by systematic racism can be deadly.

In May, when COVID-19 was killing more Black people than any other racial group in Michigan, Whitmer created the Michigan Task Force on Racial Health Disparities. In her earlier executive orders, which called for an eviction moratorium and water shut-off protections, the governor made the connection between eviction and the risk of COVID-19 infection. She was also cognizant of how the surge in evictions could lead to a surge of homelessness and housing instability in various Michigan communities, especially communities of color.

Emily Benfer, Law Professor at Wake Forest University and founder of the Health Justice Project and co-creator of Eviction Lab's COVID-19 Housing Policy Scoreboard (on which Michigan got a half-star rating for eviction prevention and housing policies), said in a statement released on August 7: "Ultimately, only a long-term solution for housing precarity can protect the millions of Americans who are accruing significant amounts of back rent and the landlords and communities who rely on rent payments." Benfer continued, "Either we agree that it is cruel to evict people in a time of pandemic or we don't." Benfer correctly observed that if there is no sustainable long-term solution to the crises of eviction and insufficient affordable housing, it will cause "the pillars of resiliency — employment, education, health care and housing — to splinter across the country, especially among communities of color who entered the pandemic at a deficit due to systemic and structural racial discrimination."

Diane Yentel, President and CEO of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, said that governmental moratoriums may not be enough to solve the

problem of evictions. She said that moratoriums "create a financial cliff for renters and landlords. We don't want to end this crisis having saddled more low-income people with more debt."

After Michigan's temporary suspension of eviction expired, Whitmer worked with the legislature to set aside \$50 million from the pandemic relief fund for the rent payment portion of an eviction diversion program. This program allows a landlord to receive 90% of rent owed if they agree to allow the tenants to stay, and will forego late fees and penalties accrued from March through July. It minimizes the rent burden to the tenants who may become homeless and jobless if evicted and helps landlords stay solvent.

With tens of thousands of renters worried and anxious about being evicted and becoming homeless in Metro Detroit, the Chief Judge of the 36th District Court in Detroit issued an eviction moratorium order to protect vulnerable renters and homeowners during the COVID-19 period. The recent presidential executive order extended the federal moratorium for properties that received federal subsidies through the end of November. Since mid-March, about "16 million Americans are without jobs, leading to a crisis of poverty and a crisis of homelessness," said Democratic Vice-Presidential pick Senator Kamala Harris.

## Eviction and race-based housing instability in historical perspective

Scholars and historians such as Robert Apthaker of Harvard, John Blussigame of Yale, and John Hope Franklin of Duke have provided detailed summaries of life and eviction anxiety in slave communities before the 20th century. It was obvious that slaves who disagreed with or disobeyed their masters would be evicted and removed from their close-knit families.

Following the Civil War in 1865, General Sherman's Field Order No. 15 tasked the Union army with planning and distributing 40-acre plots to newly

emancipated slaves. This bold gesture at making reparations was short-lived; the proclamation was overturned later that year by Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson.

After slavery and the civil war, Black people who were demoralized and discouraged about the broken promise of "40 acres and a mule," and by the terror of Ku Klux Klan during the Reconstruction era of the 1870s, decided to flee from the South to the Northern regions of the country. The Great Black Migration was a massive, channelized flow of Black families away from Southern states to Northern cities in search of personal safety, freedom, housing and employment opportunities. It involved over six million people. The story is well-documented by journalist Nicholas Lehman in his award-winning book titled, "The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America." In spite of their enormous contribution to the literary, cultural, political, and economic life of the Northern region, the new Black migrants faced pronounced racism and endured rental and housing market discrimination.

The podcast Unmasking America's Eviction Crisis regularly features well-informed guests including Dr. Matthew Desmond, founder and Director of Eviction Lab at Princeton University. Desmond is the author of a Pulitzer Award-winning book titled, "Evicted: Poverty and Profits in an American City," whose ethnographic and statistical research was conducted in Milwaukee's poor and working-class neighborhoods. Episode 2's podcast description reads, "Eviction isn't without historical context. In vulnerable communities of color, in particular, displacements and denials of housing are phenomena centuries in the making. This episode maps the persistent line between racist housing policies, localized profiteering, and the devastating plunder of generations of wealth."

In his viral essay in June 2014 of The Atlantic, "The Case for Reparations," journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates, asserted that "until we reckon with our moral debts, America will never be whole." Coates also talked about the violent massive eviction known as the Tulsa race massacre of 1920. A prosperous African American community in Tulsa, Okla., was fire-bombed in the middle of the night by a white mob; hundreds of residents died. The handful of traumatized survivors fled, abandoning their beloved community fondly known as Black Wall Street.

Another story from Coates'

influential article is a reference to writer and historian Isabel Wilkerson, author of the celebrated 2014 book "Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration." Wilkerson told the story of Eddie Earvin, a spinach picker who fled Mississippi in 1963 after being made to work at gunpoint. In the story, Earvin said, "you didn't talk to nobody about it. You had to sneak away."

A lot of Black folks who faced danger and oppression in the South fled to Northern cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and New York City. Their residential housing opportunities were even worse than those shown in photo-journalist Jacob Riis's book "How the Other Half Lives."

Black people across the country were largely cut out of the legitimate home mortgage market. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 tried to nullify housing discrimination and restrictive covenants in zoning. But having missed out on the post-war opportunities to get a foothold in the housing market, only undesirable neighborhoods with poor appreciation prospects were attainable for most.

The Great Depression was a period of high unemployment, high eviction and high housing insecurity. The Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration and Congress created the Homeowners Loan Corporation in 1933 and Federal Housing Administration in 1934. The goal was to help insure private mortgages which helped prospective homeowners during the Great Depression and beyond. However, the insured private mortgages were not made available to most African Americans from 1934 until the Fair Housing Act of 1968. In cities like Chicago, explained Coates in a 2014 article for The Atlantic, "the FHA adopted a system of maps that rated neighborhoods according to their perceived stability. Green Areas had symbols of 'A' or In Demand while predominantly Black neighborhoods were rated 'D,' and were usually considered ineligible for FHA backing."

According to Coates, one white homeowner once said that his Black neighbor was probably a nice guy, "but every time I look at him, I see \$2,000 drop off the value of my house." Coates also observed, "It was the [federal-government-backed] Home Owners' Loan Corporation, not a private trade association, that pioneered the practice of redlining, selectively granting loans and insisting that any property it insured be covered by a restrictive



## Groundcover Vendor Code during COVID-19

While Groundcover is a non-profit, and paper vendors are self-employed contractors, we still have expectations of how vendors should conduct themselves while selling and representing the paper. COVID-19 specific requirements agreed to by vendors following new training.

- I will wear a mask at all times while selling Groundcover News.
- I will use gloves, hand sanitizer or wash with soap to remove germs from my hands before selling and as needed.
- I will stay 6 feet away from others.

The following is our **Vendor Code of Conduct**, which every vendor reads and signs before receiving a badge and papers. We request that if you discover a vendor violating any tenets of the Code, please contact us and provide as many details as possible. Our paper and our vendors should be positively impacting our County.

- Groundcover will be distributed for a voluntary donation. I agree not to ask for more than the cover price or solicit donations by any other means.
- I will only sell current issues of Groundcover.
- I agree not to sell additional goods or products when selling the paper or to panhandle, including panhandling with only one paper.
- I will wear and display my badge when selling papers and refrain from wearing it or other Groundcover gear when engaged in other activities.
- I will only purchase the paper from Groundcover staff and will not sell to or buy papers from other Groundcover vendors, especially vendors who have been suspended or terminated.
- I agree to treat all customers, staff and other vendors respectfully. I will not "hard sell," threaten, harass or pressure customers, staff or other vendors verbally or physically.
- I will not sell Groundcover under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- I understand that I am not a legal employee of Groundcover but a contracted worker responsible for my own well-being and income.
- I understand that my badge is property of Groundcover and will not deface it. I will present my badge when purchasing the papers.
- I agree to stay off private property when selling Groundcover.
- I understand to refrain from selling on public buses, federal property or stores unless there is permission from the owner.
- I agree to stay at least one block away from another vendor in downtown areas. I will also abide by the Vendor Corner Policy.
- I understand that Groundcover strives to be a paper that covers topics of homelessness and poverty while providing sources of income for the homeless. I will try to help in this effort and spread the word.

## ➡ EVICTIONS from page 13

covenant — a clause in the deed forbidding the sale of the property to anyone other than Whites."

## Coping with COVID-19 evictions and the affordable housing crisis

As of August 20, there were more than 172,000 deaths from COVID-19 in America. Evictions and homelessness will continue to put the lives of the poor and people of color at severe risk.

The following policies are frequently recommended by leading advocacy groups:

1. Congress should pass a national moratorium on evictions until the COVID-19 pandemic is over;
2. Congress should appropriate \$200 billion for pandemic rental assistance;
3. Congress should pass Universal Rent Voucher legislation for all eligible low-income Americans;
4. State and local governments should make legal representation a right for tenants facing eviction;
5. Federal, state and local governments should resume building more affordable housing for the low-income population;
6. Communities should enact a local millage for affordable housing and rental emergency help.

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## ➡ PROPOSALS from page 12

rental rates and safety still remain. Despite its legislative shortcomings, the NRI did bring to light the multifaceted issues that those with housing uncertainty face and bolstered public and federal departmental support for "local solutions to revitalize and transform neighborhoods." Ann Arbor's evaluation of city-owned properties as affordable housing sites and passage of the millage for a steady, 20-year funding stream are local solutions to mitigating the housing burden of their low-income residents. Unlike PETRA's previous attempt at a 30-year "use agreement" that would result in mass sell-offs once they expire, the revenue from Ann Arbor City Proposal C will go toward construction, maintenance and acquisition of new permanent affordable housing units for people making up to 60% of the area median income, with 20% funding social services for tenants.

There was a major question brought up among the City Council in a special meeting broadcast on July 27 as to whether affordable housing could be built in flood zones. After much discussion, the Council decided to prohibit the spending of City money on providing affordable housing in floodways or floodplains. Council member Ali Ramlawi provided some reasoning behind their decision. According to an MLive article about Ann Arbor Proposal C, Ramlawi believed that "it wasn't right to put vulnerable residents in high-risk areas."

Some members of the City Council were concerned about potential

negative outcomes from the Prp C millage. City Council member Jack Eaton addressed the possibility that the tax increase could cause trouble for other working-class citizens by pricing them out of Ann Arbor. On the other hand, multiple Council members remained optimistic that the proposal, along with future teamwork among the council to make other difficult decisions, will benefit the community. As stated in the MLive article posted on July 28, 2020, Council member Julie Grand addressed Eaton's concerns by describing the tax as "just one piece in a complex puzzle."

When first introduced to Proposal C and what it aims to accomplish, University of Michigan freshman Zach Betron provided his thoughts on how the proposal could benefit the city as a whole by saying that the "the opportunity for low-income residents to shrink the gap between social classes in the city of Ann Arbor would be the most valuable outcome." Betron's words illuminate the ways that the proposal will help bring more balance to the community in terms of the range of people who live and work here.

Proposal C has the opportunity to prove itself to be more effective than PETRA's original 2010 plan despite the fact that it is being introduced on the local level. That 75% of the voters approved the millage, speaks volumes on how committed the people of Ann Arbor are to maintaining a diverse community whose basic needs are met.

## ➡ WOMEN from page 7

simply be identified as a person. Many people simply do not have their birth certificates or social security cards. These are mandatory requirements for obtaining any identification in many states. This issue not only affects the ability to vote, but also the capability to obtain food stamps, bank accounts and housing programs. This seemingly minute issue is one of the major root causes of cyclical homelessness and lack of homeless voter turnout.

Recently in Ann Arbor, an affordable housing tax proposal was on the November ballot, directly impacting a population of approximately 2,000 housing insecure adults who might have voted on the proposal. Yet every vote is just as relevant, especially when issues on the ballot concern a population known for its lack of voter turnout.

In the 2018 Women's Voices Issue

of Groundcover News' LaShawn Courtwright's article, "Not hopeless or helpless, just homeless" she calls society to action since "we can change this picture if we all pitch in to bring it to a halt ... this thing called homelessness!" While many people do not understand the situations behind homelessness, many women do understand what it feels like to not have a voice. The voting voice has been fought for since the Civil War, and our current moment is every citizen's chance to push aside gender, socioeconomic status, race and any other discriminators to create an atmosphere of advocacy for those struggling to vote. By providing more accessibility to means of obtaining identification through governmental agencies, educational classes on voting, and mental health services directed towards women, homeless women will begin to be heard.



➔ **COMMUNITY** from page 2

counseling to those who report mental health concerns. According to Ozone House, there are about 86,000 homeless people in Michigan. Of those, more than 38,000 are homeless children “living on their own, left to their own devices and fending for themselves.” Along with homelessness impacting Michigan youth, mental health issues are also prominent. According to Ozone House, a survey done with former homeless youth showed that about 71% of participants said that homelessness impacted their mental and emotional health.

Receiving help for mental health issues is often overlooked, but so important. Many of us are privileged to have access to resources to get the help we need. However, these resources are usually costly, which creates a mental health access barrier for homeless people. Therapy, for example, is a mental health resource that is often cost-prohibitive. Also, there is a lot of stigma that surrounds going to therapy, being homeless and having mental health issues. As a result, homeless people who are seeking access to resources such as therapy may find it more difficult to ask for help.

Homelessness is a large issue in the United States today, and with the lack of equitable access to mental health resources, many Americans battle with both homelessness and mental health issues at the same time. The Homeless Mentally Ill Facts and Figures study by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in 2015 revealed that, 564,708 people were homeless on a given night in the United States. A National Institute of Mental Health in 2014 estimated that at least 45% of the homeless population in the United States has a history of mental illness diagnoses.

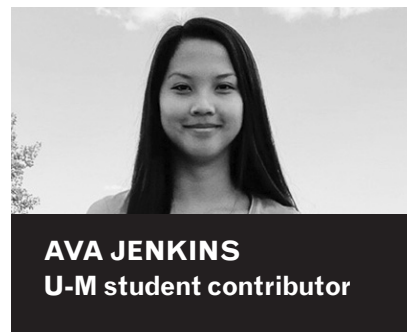
Homelessness is decreasing little by little; as of 2018, 552,830 Americans were counted as homeless, according to The State of Homelessness in America. The small decrease, however, doesn’t mean that homelessness isn’t a big issue. Especially during a global pandemic, there are a lot of concerns with making ends meet, which causes uncertainty with housing situations. Also during this unprecedented time, those without a place to call home are often overlooked but they are in dire need of assistance. For some, it is impossible to isolate “due to lack of housing and access to those essential services that have reduced services, like Community Mental Health,” said WDIV news producer Meredith Bruckner. It is crucial that those who live in the comforts of their homes offer whatever help they can.

Though you may not see it, homelessness is prominent in our Washtenaw County community. Young people are disproportionately affected by homelessness, which leaves an impact on many aspects of their lives, including their mental well-being. Local organizations work to help homeless youth gain resources, and they encourage people within the County community to provide service to help strengthen Ann Arbor and beyond. The best way to visualize the situation within

Washtenaw County is to look at the statistical data. Ashley Blake, a community building lead with Avalon Housing, an Ann Arbor-based nonprofit that provides safe and supportive housing, was quoted in the University Wire saying, “while the county is relatively wealthy, there are a number of individuals who are of lower socioeconomic status.” Although the number of homeless people has decreased over the years, this number is still significant. In a 2019 Point-in-Time count, a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January, there were 273 people counted as homeless in Washtenaw County. Going further in depth, 54 of the 273 people were children under 18; two of the children were unaccompanied minors. That means there are children unable to have stable heating and water, unable to call a place their permanent home.

One of the major ways that mental health issues within the homeless community can be targeted is through the development of programs that provide affordable and accessible support. Ozone House focuses on this issue, with a mission to “help youth develop essential life skills, improve their relationships, and enhance their self-image so that they may realize their full potential for growth and happiness.” Ozone House staff understands that, for these youth, “Homelessness means a lack of safe, stable, reciprocal relationships and vulnerability to dangers such as physical assault, sexual assault, or human trafficking.” These are issues that need serious attention and Ozone House works to provide sufficient support systems. According to the Ozone House website, they have annually provided youth with 4,112 hours of professional therapy. These efforts ensure that youth experiencing homelessness can address their mental health concerns.

Providing adequate mental health services and stable living conditions, such as Ozone House’s support systems, can be essential to helping youth create a more stable future for themselves. As a nonprofit, Ozone House accepts donations in order to provide free counseling and coaching to the youth that approach them. Their website details the many ways in which they accept donations, including by phone and mail. For those who may not have the means to donate money but still wish to contribute, such as students at the University of Michigan, you can donate your time. According to their website, Ozone House offers a crisis line that is available 24 hours per day, every day. These crisis lines are critical to assisting youth when they need it most, and they require lots of volunteer support. Other ways that volunteers assist those in need is by bringing them school supplies, socks or underwear or assisting them in working on their abilities to obtain a job. By contributing to organizations like Ozone House, local students and community members can directly target the urgent mental health needs of the homeless youth within our community, and we can begin to provide them with a chance at a future that is no longer one of instability and insecurity, but one of hope.

➔ **IDENTITY** from page 6**“The question”**

**AVA JENKINS**  
U-M student contributor

A room of unknown faces. I find an open desk next to the window. The girl in front of me turns around, her blonde hair gracefully landing behind her shoulder. She glances at me and tilts her head. “What are you?” she asks. Her tone is friendly, yet I feel a

ping of hurt in my chest and my face reddens. I sit back in my seat, not sure what to say.

Even since the fourth grade, the classic “What are you?” question has not been easy for me to answer. It has become an accepted getting-to-know-you question that people ask with innocent curiosity, but it can be jarring to hear as a person of color. As a child, I was easily offended by this question because it made me feel strangely different. Was it my almond-shaped eyes, my frizzy hair, my tanned skin? I assumed they asked because I was a rather unique sight in my community.

Now, as a freshman at the University of Michigan, when I receive “the question,” my usual response is, “My dad is Filipino and my mom is White.” It’s short and to-the-point; it’s just enough for people to feel like they truly know more about me. But really, this answer leaves so much out. If I had time to share more deeply about myself, I would speak of my dad’s parents who are first generation immigrants from the Philippines and my mom’s family, who have history in central Europe; she is 99% Ashkenazi Jew.

I am a combination of my parents’ upbringings. My dad grew up going to church with the other Catholic Filipino families in his community of Farmington Hills, Mich. My mom grew up eating Kosher and going to Hebrew school in Huntington Woods, Mich. Their paths intersected at the University of Michigan, through the tight community formed in the halls of South Quad.

So now here I am, a person of mixed culture among a new generation of unique individuals, seeking a community of my own at the place my parents met. My first thought was to investigate clubs which fit me, and so I set out to find the Filipino and Judaic student groups.

When I was walking through the Diag during the first week of school, I noticed a flag hanging in the trees. From a distance I was trying to make out which country it belonged to. I didn’t recognize the colors or the order of the stars. When I got closer, the club table sign read Filipino American Association. I was shocked. I didn’t recognize the flag of the country half of my family calls home. A wave of shame rushed through my body. I thought that I knew my heritage to a point where I could talk about it with pride. This was the club I was supposed to belong to. Did I belong here?

After much deliberation and a few calls back home, I recognize that I am distant from both sides of my culture. I don’t know the native language, I don’t practice the same religion. However, I look forward to the Jewish holidays, I crave Filipino food, I like going to Temple with my grandma. There is so much more to identity than membership to a club. The rice cooker in my kitchen cabinet, the challah bread on my counter and the endless family stories around the kitchen table are enough for me to feel connected to my mixed heritage.

So now when I receive “the question” from fellow University of Michigan students, I answer with pride. I am proud of my ancestors and the diversity of my family. However, I have realized that ethnicity is just one aspect of my identity. Instead of allowing the question to bother me, I use it to remind myself of my family history and connect me to my present: I am telling their story, and starting mine.



# Teens run to Ozone House

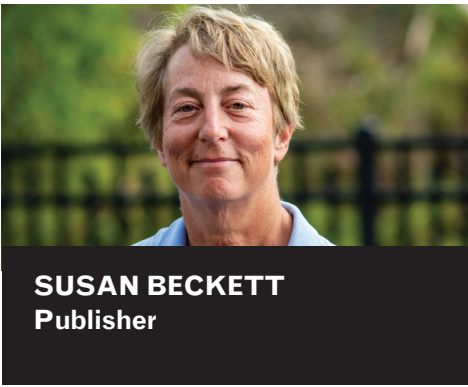
Teens in trouble have been turning to Ozone House for the last 30 years. Offerings evolved to include family counseling as well as temporary and transitional housing programs. Approximately 160 to 240 teens find their way to Ozone House each year, some for a few weeks to work through a crisis and some for a few years as they chart a new path for their lives.

Teen-acting-out crosses all socio-economic lines, according to Ozone House clinical director Karen Boyce, though she attributes some of the motivation in stable households to thrill-seeking. Survival underlies the acting out of the majority of those seeking refuge at Ozone House. “They are very much overrepresented by kids who grew up on assistance or in low-income housing,” said Boyce. Moving frequently with episodes of housing insecurity is part of their reality. Many are unaware of the Education Project which helps displaced youth get to school and participate fully, and get stressed and fall behind in school. Doubling up or staying with friends or relatives poses difficulties for teens struggling for independence. “They’ve been raised with episodes of homelessness and trauma... that’s all they know. How could I expect them not to be struggling with homelessness themselves?” mused Boyce.

Boyce has noticed an increase in the seriousness and repeated trauma in homeless episodes of the families now coming to Ozone House, especially among the “new homeless,” who a few years ago could never have imagined themselves in their current circumstances. In her 17 years working there, things have gone from “There are generally enough services” to “Wow, these kids have been failed by the system and every family member they have encountered.” Community and home lives have become increasingly violent, with calm and stability rare commodities, according to Boyce.

Without a stable place to sleep at night, cell phones become a necessity for teens who go through their contacts looking for a place to crash. Many also use their cell phones to access the internet and complete school assignments. Ozone House recently added a computer lab for the use of the teens in its Safe Stay program.

The Safe Stay program, housed in Ozone’s Washtenaw Road headquarters,



SUSAN BECKETT  
Publisher

is a short term residential shelter for 10- to 17-year-olds. During their two- to three-week stay, up to six residents receive individual and perhaps family counseling to address the intense conflicts that caused them to leave home, coping skills training, group counseling and life skills preparation. Staff and outside experts coach residents on topics like internet safety, substance abuse prevention, youth legal rights and safety, cooking, communication skills and setting boundaries and goals.

Group counseling often comes in the form of art, adventure therapy, written or spoken word composition and performance. Individual therapy is likely to be done conversationally on a walk or while shooting hoops, if that setting is more comfortable for the teen.

The staff at Ozone House respects kids for what they know (and they often have remarkable survival skills) and tries to engage youth in discovering what more they need to be successful in a socially acceptable way. One young woman arrived with a penchant for braiding hair which she often did for roommates and friends. The staff helped her realize she could become a licensed cosmetologist and make a career of this. They supported her in completing her GED and becoming comfortable conversing with people. She eventually graduated from the Aveda Institute, rented space in a salon, and built up her clientele to the point where she and a partner opened their own salon.

The age population they work with, 10- to 20-year-olds, often blend in with their peers, even though they don’t know where they will be sleeping that night. “You don’t see kids as homeless the way you do with adults,” noted Boyce. “Those kids panhandling in the Diag are just as likely to be local kids just looking for extra spending money.”



**Left:** Eric, formerly an Ozone House drop-in student, received his Safe Serve certificate from the Community Kitchen and jumped at the chance to become the Ozone House Drop-in Chef. **Right:** Ebony Mead, 20, and Wyattte Von D, 19, long-time drop-in participants, now work in the program. Wyattte is a Peer Outreach Worker.



They emphasize the importance of feeling safe, connected and accepted and have special programs for teens whose sexual identity makes them especially vulnerable to rejection. All youth can build their self-esteem and give back to the community through the Youth Making Impact program.

Among the homeless 18-year-olds showing up on their doorstep are kids who have aged out of the foster care system. Others are kids whose own struggling families tell them they can no longer afford them and they will have to fend for themselves. These are the same kids who missed school so they could care for sick younger siblings or an aging grandparent so their parents would not have to miss work. They often had part-time jobs and contributed to the family. They are drawn to returning to their family to give or get help.

Miller House offers up to six young adults a supportive living situation from which they can move to living on their own. During their stay residents receive counseling and case management services, and develop life skills. Case managers remain active when residents move out on their own, until their services are no longer needed.

The Drop-in Center in Ypsilanti plays an important role for these teens, as well as others who drop in after school. The hot meal that is served in the early evening might be the only meal they get that day. The computers allow them to finish schoolwork and pursue employment

opportunities and the counselors offer them some positive adult interactions and solutions to some of the problems they are struggling with, like how to get to school, get a job, get a library card or enroll in Medicaid. They have an opportunity to engage in yoga and to practice and perform music and spoken word poetry.

The evening meal preparation doubles as culinary arts instruction as part of the Food Gatherers Community Kitchen training and placement program. Having just lost a major grant, many of these services will be curtailed at the start of 2012. They will continue the evening meal and focus on delivering services and employment training. Local teens will have to find a new safe space to go to after school.

Ozone House relies on volunteers for some critical functions. Volunteers staff the crisis hotline, after completing a 40-hour training. Each volunteer typically works one 3-4 hour shift per week. Volunteers also staff events, stuff envelopes, make monetary and gift donations and satisfy other requests found at the Ozone House website wish list.

**Editor’s note:** Ozone House main campus is at 1600 N Huron River Dr, Ypsilanti. The teen Drop-In Center is located at 102 N. Hamilton in downtown Ypsilanti.

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